

## Part IV

### 1930s

*Libraries can get you through times of no money better than money can get you through times of no libraries.*

—Anne Herbert

In 1928, the year before the Great Depression, book circulation totaled 92,500 volumes. In the 12-month period starting six months after the October 1929 Wall Street debacle, circulation jumped to the 100,000 mark. This increase continued throughout the era, reaching a peak of 150,000 in one year.

The newspaper reported that in Wilmington, “those hit hardest by the depression turned to the library—not merely for an easy, free means of passing their periods of enforced leisure, but for knowledge and information with which to start a new fight for a living.”

#### *Drastic Measures*

In 1932, the city fathers cut the library budget by 25%, and library appropriations were eliminated from the county budget. Library staff took a cut in pay, and volunteers kept the reading room open during evening hours.

A special collection of books concerning how to find employment was placed together on a separate, easily accessible rack.

The library Board of Trustees instructed the librarian to send all duplicate copies of books to the Wilmington Colored Library and the public school libraries because their ability to purchase new books was practically nonexistent.

#### *Citizens Pitch In*

The Wilmington Relief Association was organized to respond to local unemployment before the big federal government programs were inaugurated. One program sponsored by the Relief Association encouraged those who were lucky enough to still have a job to donate a day's pay, deducted from their wages, to an unemployed worker. In turn, the jobless worker was paid to perform various public works duties. The building of Greenfield Lake's Community Drive was one of their enduring projects.



*Wilmington Relief Association workers wait for a day's wages*

Librarian Emma Woodward sought help from the Relief Association. Carpenters were dispatched to repair book stacks. Relief workers cleaned the library, repaired tattered volumes, inventoried the collection and cataloged non-fiction books. Miss Woodward also secured salaries for the women who had been volunteering during evening hours at the library.

#### *Impressionable Youths*



*Young reader Claude Howell*

Artist Claude Howell and Newscaster David Brinkley, two notable natives, later reflected on the importance of the library during their formative years.

Howell (1915-1997) recalled, “I’m sure I read every book in the Wilmington Public Library. Where else could my imagination travel the globe? Reading has been important to me all of my life.”

Brinkley (1920-2003) reminisced, “If there is anything worth knowing about me, it is that at the age of 10 or 12 I became a semi-permanent fixture at the Wilmington Public Library. I

would go every day after school and stay till it closed.

My friends kidded me a lot about it, saying I would read every book in the library. That’s really where I learned what little I know.”

Miss Woodward gave David a free publisher’s copy of Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West*, saying “Nobody else in the county will ever read it.”

He held on to this book throughout his life.



*Young reader David Brinkley*

#### *Washington Tries to Help*

In 1935, the library Board of Trustees decided to ask for federal Public Works Administration (PWA) funds to construct a new library building. The government required proof that the completed project would be self-supporting.

Local government officials, still weary from “hard times,” were unable to promise future support; however, they did return salaries to pre-Depression levels.

#### *Loss of a Landmark*

In 1936, the federal government appropriated funds to tear down Wilmington’s US Post Office and build a new one. The handsome brownstone post office with its impressive Romanesque arches was only 45 years old.